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Most criticisms directed at basal reader stories concern the unreal characters which tend to depict only middle-class families and use unreal language patterns. However, such criticisms do not get to the core of the problem. A comparison of stories from basal readers with some famous folk tales illustrates how the here-and-now stories from basal readers fail to stimulate children's imaginations. The folk tale is unique in eliciting fanciful interpretation from children and adults because it is read at the level appropriate for the reader or listener. It permits self-discovery by allowing the reader or listener to look inside himself and allows the child to raise questions about himself and his own future. In contrast, the here-and-now stories from basal readers leave no room for the imagination. They lack life and passion and are too concerned about other children. (NS)

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FOLK TALES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Session 16B, The Role of Literature
Literature in the Elementary School

Fascination with folk tales is the happy lot of king and commoner; of the withered sage and the youngest child. Marc Chagall has illustrated folk tales in glowing colors. Serge Prokofiev used a folk tale as the basis for his "Peter and the Wolf;" Sigmund Freud went to the folk tales for support of his psychological theories; while Claude Levi-Strauss used the same tales to illustrate his anthropological investigations.

And yet, these same stories capture young children just as surely in their web. Who has not sat with a prized child on his lap and told "Babouska," or "Little Red Riding Hood," or "The Fisherman and his Wife," and watched as the child's eyes began to look far away at another time and into another place?

Now, why should this be so? Why does a folk tale have the power to stimulate the mind of child and sophisticated adult alike? Part of the answer, I believe, lies in the fact that a folk tale can be translated at the depth appropriate for the beholder.

Many of the stories we give children to read tell all there is to tell. There is no hidden magic, no room for fanciful interpretation. It's all there to begin with. Consider a story from a popular first grade reader:

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The Little Sled*

Bob and Ben sat on a little sled.
The sled started to run fast.
It ran down the big hill.

Faster and faster went the sled.
Bob and Ben held on to it.
"Stop the sled!" said Bob.

The sled hit a bump.
Bob and Ben fell from the sled.

The little sled did not stop.
It ran on and on.
It ran into a red barn.

The barn bent the little sled.
And the sled dented the barn.

Bob and Ben got wet.

Contrast this story with one you are more familiar with: "The Gingerbread Boy." In this story, as you recall, a little man and a little woman want a child, and the woman bakes one of gingerbread. The gingerbread boy runs away and is eventually overtaken by a sly fox. The last lines of the story are as follows:

> Soon the fox caught the gingerbread boy and began to eat him up.
> The gingerbread boy said: "Oh, I'm half gone!"
> And soon: "I'm three-quarters gone!" and at last: "I'm all gone!"
> And that was the end of the gingerbread boy.

Now here is a tale that gives room for the imagination to play. Our young reader, first encountering the story, must experience a tumult of emotions. He, like that gingerbread boy, hears the beckoning call of the

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*From Glenn McCracken and Charles C. Walcutt, "The Little Sled," Basic Reading, Primer. J.B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia, 1966, pages 22-23.

open road. Unlike the gingerbread boy, however, He does not answer the call. His steps to independence are slow and hesitant, not saucy and eager like those of the boy in the tale. But at the same time our fledgling reader savors the delicious freedom the gingerbread boy seizes for himself, he must experience, too, quite another emotion. For leaving one's family is hard -- to simply run away from good and kind parents without a backward look suggests a callousness which is scarcely comprehensible.

And then there is the chase. The little old man and the little old woman, the barn full of threshers, the field full of mowers, the cow and the pig -- all these, in apparently mindless reaction, join in pursuit. And at the end, that awful moment, when the gingerbread boy -- and each of us -- is caught by the wily fox,

> "I'm quarter gone! . . . . . I'm half gone!
> . . . . . I'm three-quarters gone! . . . . .
> I'm all gone!"

There is, I'm sure, as much pathos in those lines as in any in the English language. Gone are the Mother and Father he never even knew; gone is the wild race down the road with the wind singing in his ears; gone is the dream of outdistancing the world . . . . . for, as the unknown story teller so eloquently understates the matter:

> . . . . . that was the end of the gingerbread boy.

It is tempting to think that "Gingerbread Boy" is an anomoly; certainly few of the other folk tales have the same opportunity for dark, fertile interpretation.

But take "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." No doubt each of us has told this charming story countless times to small fry we know. The bears, on a clear summer day, leave the house for a walk through the woods while they wait for the porridge to cool. Goldilocks, who lives on the other side of

the wood and has been sent on an errand by her mother, passes by the house and looks in the window. When she sees no one is home, she lifts the latch and enters. After eating the porridge, Goldilocks tests out the living room chairs, sitting right through the bottom of Baby Bear's chair. And, wearied from her exertions, she climbs the stairs and, in the bedchamber of the three bears, locates a bed of the right size, covers herself, and lies waiting for sleep to come.

I called Goldilocks a charming story. And charming it is, for there is a supernatural dreamlike quality in this account. Why does Goldilock's mother send the child through dark woods on an errand? It is part of the charm -- a preordained pattern of behavior: she cannot help herself; like the mother of Little Red Riding Hood, or the father in Hansel and Gretel, she abandons her child, the object most precious to her, into danger. And Goldilocks is charmed, too. As in a trance, she steps into the dark and fearsome wood even though she must be aware that by going she leaves behind the warm protecting arms of her mother.

As children, each of us has felt that same abandonment; it may have been over a matter no more significant that our parents' approval of our staying overnight at a friend's house, and yet it carried with it the germ of fear: "What if they are not here when I return?"

Why does Goldilocks enter the bear's cottage? Perhaps because she was charmed. The spell of a stranger's house with nobody there affected her just as it does any child. Have you ever been the trespasser in someone else's house? You slide from room to room, opening drawers and rubbing fingers over cloth and wood, you rummage through closets and spy into a hundred unknown places. You break into the cupboard and eat his

food, comb your hair with his comb, sit in his chair or lie in his bed, and imagine what it would be like to be him for a time. But the trespasser must be caught; and Goldilocks is no exception. As the tale tells itself, she found a bed that was,

> . . . neither too high at the head, nor at the foot . . . she covered herself up, and lay there till she fell fast asleep.

Logically, you could not fall asleep in a stranger's house. Waiting for his return, your heart would pound in fear. But when under a spell, that logic disappears. The deeper logic -- that we must be found out for our misdeeds, prevails.

We have, then, in the Goldilocks tale an account of estrangement and enchantment, with a little girl acting our fears and secret longings. The loss of parents and the question of their loyalty to us, the forbidden trespass in a stranger's house, the dreaded but coveted moment of discovery when misdeeds are bared -- these are part of the underlying strata of meaning in this superficially simple tale.

Or take the "Three Billy Goats Gruff." [I'm using the most well known of the tales, so that we'll have common ground for discussion. And, too, the fact that they are best known suggests that, for us, at any rate, they apparently have the greatest significance.] The first billy goat trips across the bridge, pleads with the troll to wait for an older brother, as he is much fatter; the second billy goat presents the same argument to the troll, and the third billy goat, when threatened by the troll, replies as follows:

> Well, come along! I've got two spears
> I'll poke your eyeballs out of your ears,
> I've got besides two curling stones,
> And I'll crush you to bits, body and bones.

What meanings lie snarled and dormant in this story? All of us have felt that cold breath of fear when we passed a darkened alley, or

dived into unknown waters, or skirted a shadowed copse of trees at dusk. When I was a boy, I often crossed a rude wooden bridge. It rested on dank, mossy abutments which were the homes of tangles of garter snakes. Often, on a warm spring day, several big fellows would stretch out and sun themselves on the warm dusty planks. They would slither through cracks in the boards when they felt the vibration caused by my hesitant footsteps on the other side of the bridge. Imagine how it feels to cross when you know that in the cool shade snakes are waiting for you to pass! What if they dart out and strike? My blood is still quickened when I read of the troll -- with "eyes as big as a saucer and a nose as long as a poker," for if known garter snakes under a bridge are frightening, think how terrifying is an unknown troll lurking there!

But there is another element to the story which is, in a sense, more pernicious in its meaning than the troll under the bridge. That troll is blatant evil -- and we can fight him. But what of the response of the first billy goat:

> "Oh, no, pray don't eat me.
> I'm too little, that I am. Wait a bit
> till the second billy goat gruff comes;
> he's much bigger."

To put the matter rather indelicately: "Don't eat me, eat my brother." Now one could argue that the Little Billy Goat Gruff had faith in his older brother's skill as a fighter, but wouldn't you think that, if such were his thoughts, he would at least retrace his way and warn his brothers of danger? In this folk tale we do not find such fraternal concern. Each Billy Goat seems inclined to save only his own skin -- no matter the cost to his brother. Here is evil, but not the open, blustering, clearly marked evil of the troll. This is a masked, sinister inner evil. In each of us lives the Little Billy Gruff -- "Send my brother, but spare me!"

Earlier, I suggested that the folk tale was unique in its power to stimulate the mind of the child and the world-satiated adult alike. Now, why do children respond so vigorously to these old stories? The conventional notion is that the stimulation lies in the tales' repetition of question and answer; in their satisfying clusters of threes; in the characterization of persons and animals of great strength, cleverness, poverty and wealth; in the overcoming of great obstacles by superhuman heroes; or in the talking animals and fairy godmothers.

I do not think that these conventional answers are satisfactory. They seem to describe a feast by listing carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals in the menu. Folk tales have not lived from generation through generation or from century to century because of their repetition, or clusters of threes, or fairy godmothers. If that were all that they contained, they would long since have dwindled into obscurity.

In a physical world where continents and seas have been mainly charted, an inner territory, unknown and fascinating, continues to beckon. Folk tales have flourished because they prize open the dark corners of our minds; they tap the wells of fear and self-aggrandizement and lust. Through them, the reader has his chance to grapple with that self he keeps locked deep inside.

Hallucinogins and sensitivity training are two recent attempts to become better acquainted with that hidden territory. The lexicon tells us this -- a "good trip" lights the happy recesses of the mind; while a "bad trip" takes us into shores of the imagination we have never dared acknowledge.

And the beguilingly simple folk tale is another kind of trip inside ourselves; for each of us, it can be a doorway into self-discovery.

The question might be asked, "But what if folk tales blow their minds?" Is the folk tale like LSD -- with the chance of a bad trip always there? I don't think so. Earlier I suggested that the power of the folk tale is that it can be taken at the level appropriate for the beholder. This is the safety valve. If the child chooses to read the meanings, he may; but if he wants to stay in the security of repetition and talking animals and trilogies of happenings, that's his choice, too.

It is surprising but true that many of us who ought to know better continue to misinterpret what it is that young children want to read. Typical of this viewpoint is the notion that the first literary fare should be stories of the here and now, a world that is, according to many child authorities, still new and strange and mysterious to the child.

Such a story is "The Little Sled," which I read to you earlier. While this story may be new and mysterious and strange to the young child, by comparison with most folk tales it seems without life or passion.

But "The Little Sled" is no worse or better than any of the stories we find in most first grade reading books. Not that these stories lack critics! And for a variety of causes: they are not real, say their critics, because the people in them are middle class families, with beautiful mothers and elegant fathers, cheery grandparents, and clever children; or they are not real because the language patterns used do not sound natural to the ear.

I do not think that such criticism gets to the center of what is lacking in basal reader stories. A writer could fabricate stories with a class range from the most lowly slum dweller to the prince of commerce; he could have his illustrator paint in the faces of white, black, red and yellow people in a ratio appropriate to the population; he could search the streets and houses of America for dialogue that catches the tune of

spoken language now -- and the stories still would not live.

They would not live because they would not have the heart and pulse of significant happenings in them. A sled bouncing into a barn, Betty losing her ball, or Nick and Pam selling lemonade on a hot day are what we call here and now stories, but they do not grip the mind of the young reader. What does he care if the sled runs clear through the barn, or the lemonade gets too warm? Nothing! What he cares about is the storm of feeling in himself. He thinks about his father -- is he a real father or an imposter? He thinks about his own manliness. How would he face a wicked monster who threatened his life? A swarm of questions buzz in his brain, and we answer them with delicate little stories from which all life blood has been robbed.

It is curious, but true, that the folk tale, with its antique language, its talk of kings and princes, its trolls and elves, is much closer to the real life of the child than most of the modern, realistic stories of father and mother, sister and the family car. A writer's chances of fabricating a story that mirrors a child's life is slim indeed -- what the city child knows, the suburban or rural child does not, and vice-versa. But with folk tales, all the pretenses of reality are stripped away, and what is revealed is raw, unadorned emotion -- the stuff all of us use for fuel in our lives. We recognize ourselves, because the story shows us our own faces so plainly.

Folk tales, then, give the child a chance to look inside himself. But why does he need to look inside? Is he developing his ego, or providing a defense against the humdrum quality of his life? I do not think so. I would be much more inclined to think that folk tales give the child an

opportunity to try on with a measure of safety the roles life has in mind for him. This is where we make our mistake in deciding what children need to read. The here and now stories are concerned with other children. But a look at children's fantasies reveals that what the child is thinking of is not other children, but of what lies ahead for himself. What will it be like when he is separated from his mother and father? With what courage will he face the deep forests and dark waters of the world? How will he assume the cloak of manhood? How can he handle the hostility and aggression of giants? These concerns live with the child, and make up a good measure of his fantasy play. Normal development demands that he raise these questions. Working with scraps of adult behavior, with day dreams, with the actions of storied people, the child pieces together his answers.

That's where folk tales come in. Within their shelter, the child can live for a short time in a world he knows will someday be his. The future and all that it holds of promise and terror, drama and lust, can be his to practice on within the boundaries of a simple tale.

Francis Thompson, a nineteenth century English poet, wrote:

> Know you what it is to be a child? . . .
> it is to be so little that the elves can reach
> to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches
> and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing
> into everything,
> for each child has its fairy godmother in its soul.

That fairy godmother lives in each of us; she whispers in our ear, if we choose to listen. She tells us of ourselves, the dark, gay, wild selves hidden far inside. Will we heed her voice?